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THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY

VOL. III

OCTOBER, 1917

NO. 4

DE GUSTIBUS

By CARL ENGEL

Il s'agit de souffler de son souffle tant qu'on a le souffle.

—Vincent van Gogh.

A SCOTTISH friend of mine tells this story about his cook: One day, when she had cooked her master an especially good soup, he inquired appreciatively what ingredients she had used to make it so tasteful; and she replied laconically —“There is thote in t'ilt.”

Thought, alas! is as helpful in preparing savory soups, as it is expedient in making a work of fine art. But the thought alone might not, indeed it could not, have produced in the cook's case such excellent results, had her imaginative resourcefulness not been subjected to a critical control, that is, had she not possessed a discriminating and sensitive palate, or the gift of taste.

Now, we shall not quarrel as to the merits of this or that soup. You may prefer your lentil soup cooked with a partridge, or with a piece of venison; you may prefer *Crème de crevettes roses à l'Infante* to *Bisque of Lobster Cardinal*; you may like your clam-chowder *à la Manhattan* rather than *à la Nouvelle Angleterre*. Perhaps you are willing to pass all of these by for the sake of a *Taoungakong*, *Canton style*; or you may not feel safe in venturing beyond a plain and unadulterated *Kraftbrühe*. No one disputes your right to your own personal taste in soups. *Cherchez l'estomac!* But you must agree that any or all of these appetizing concoctions might readily be spoiled, for all but exceptional tongues, by an

overdose of pepper or a dash of kerosene. Nor is the broth made better when you let it burn.

And you will ask: What of Vatel's, Vachette's and Brillat-Savarin's gastronomy in a magazine devoted to Palestrina, Orlando & Co?—We come to it presently. In Mendel's Musical Lexicon may be found a paragraph on *Geschmack* by "W. W." (Wilhelm Wundt) which contains the following: "Eine Speise, welche dem Geschmacksinn nichts bietet, wird als fade, reizlose verworfen; ebenso wird ein künstlerisches Gebilde, welches dem inneren Schönheitssinne keine Befriedigung gewährt, für wertlos erachtet."¹ Multitudinous and multiform have been the attempts to define "sense of beauty" and "sense of taste." With what success? Let us hear Jean Marnold: "La question qui se pose, impérative et troublante, est de définir le 'Goût,' puis, et presque aussitôt, sa cause à la fois et son objet, à savoir ce qu'on nomme le 'Beau.' Il n'est guère de mots plus discutés et plus vagues, encore que chacun en use couramment, les accouple et parfois les oppose."² We shall not chase a phantom. Fortunately there is enough reality upon which to base a few observations that may not be impertinent.

Wundt's parallel holds good. The cook needed "thote" plus a palate. The musical composer, and to a not inconsiderable degree the musical critic, require thought plus an ear or two. You object to such trite remarks, and wearily exclaim: "Old story!" Pardon me:

'S ist eine alte Geschichte,
Doch bleibt sie ewig neu—

and it seems timely to drag it once more from its dusty shelf, since Mr. Lawrence Gilman, in the January, 1917, issue of this publication, seriously propounded the astounding theory that we had no "touchstones," or standards, by which to test the metal of music!

Mr. Gilman admits that "The art of music. . . . stands apart from the other arts." And yet he shows annoyed surprise when a method which Matthew Arnold recommended, to detect poetic excellence, does not prove workable as applied to music. Small wonder. Music does stand apart; and necessarily the

¹A dish which offers nothing to the sense of taste, will be returned as flat and lacking flavor; for the same reason, a work of art which offers nothing to the inner sense of beauty will be considered worthless.

²The question which arises, imperatively and perturbingly, is to define "Taste," and then, or almost simultaneously, to define its cause as well as its object, to wit: what is called "Beauty." There are hardly two words more discussed, yet more vague, in spite of the fact that everyone uses them constantly, couples, or again contrasts them.

method by which to detect musical excellence is one peculiar to this art. Walter Pater has pointed the way to it. His words on the subject can not be quoted too often nor too extensively:

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of color, in painting—of sound, in music—of rhythmical words, in poetry. In this way the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is made a matter of indifference; and a clear apprehension of the opposite principle—that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind—is the beginning of all true æsthetic criticism. For as art addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the ‘imaginative reason’ through the senses, there are differences in kind of æsthetic beauty, corresponding to the differences in kind of the gifts of sense themselves. Each art, therefore, having its own peculiar and incommunicable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination, its own special responsibilities to its material. One of the functions of æsthetic criticism is to define these limitations; to estimate the degree in which a given work of art fulfils its responsibilities to its special material; to note in music the musical charm—that essential music, which presents no words, no matter of sentiment or thought, separable from the special form in which it is conveyed to us.

If the sensuous element constitutes and comprehends almost everything that is essentially artistic in art, and if each art has certain responsibilities to its special material, or sensuous element, subject to definite limitations, and if the greater or lesser fulfilment of these responsibilities is the measure of artistic excellence, it remains to be seen how this axiom may find application in the art of music.

The sensuous element of music is tone.

A musical composition is the more artistic, the more tone-combinations of a sensuously beautiful order it contains.

The limitations to which musical tone is subject are, on one side, its degeneration into brute noise and, on the other side, its treatment and appeal in a purely or primarily intellectual way.

The responsibilities which the artist has towards tone, as a sensuous medium of expressing emotional and imaginative contents, and of communicating to the listener a peculiar charm by his conception of its inherent beauty and organic perfection, is to guard tone from overstepping its boundaries, and to develop its sensuous, or most artistic qualities to the highest possible degree—to make it yield its ripest and most luscious fruit.

And by its fruit, ye shall know it.

To avoid misunderstanding, I want to give here, parenthetically, brief consideration to one important point, more typical of music than of the other arts. I mean the evolution of the very material, or sensuous element, of music. The rapid transformation of musical styles, or, more precisely, the progressively varying ideas which we have about concord and discord, are not fundamentally due to a change in æsthetic criteria. Their cause is a physiological one, first brought into the light of scientific research by Helmholtz. The organ which transmits sound-waves to our brains, the mechanism of the ear, is evidently undergoing a process of development, as yet not fully understood. But what seems clearly demonstrated, or at least a plausible supposition, is the fact that owing to these changes the sensuous medium readjusts itself, of necessity and automatically, in order to continue its function of conveying to our aural nerves and brain cells that peculiar "musical charm," the essence of music. For this reason certain tone-combinations lose their sensuous potency, when our ears become over-familiar with them and dulled to their impress. Other tone-combinations take their place. Weber's "gruesome" diminished-seventh chord no longer fills us with terror. The augmented triads of the Valkyries' steeds have been ridden fast and furiously to their doom. The ninth chord dear to Claude Achille Debussy becomes a blunt weapon in hands of lesser skill than his. We are now witnessing the popularization of the whole-tone scale. It has found its way already into comic opera. It will in turn, and in a not far distant future, become commonplace, an instrument of torture. Music—that is, our realization of tonal possibilities—is in its infancy. Its stammering is divine. What will the full-grown speech be? Will our aural sense develop, until at last we hear the voices from Beyond and the much vaunted music of the Spheres? Until we reach that day, the stimulus which is required to make us feel the sensuous charm of music, will gradually and consistently take on different shades and degrees. We all know how surprised we are when we take up an old piece of music which we loved dearly once upon a time, and find that it appeals to us no longer.—The form or character of musical composition, however, has so far not been affected by equally radical changes. On the contrary, old *forms* still preserve their quaint and lovely grace. But it is useless to deny that most of us, to-day, find greater sensuous charm and more enjoyment in a Pavane by Maurice Ravel than in one by John Dowland (1562-1626).

And that is the salient thing—a work of art must give us enjoyment and satisfaction. Theodore Lipps, the eminent psychologist in Munich, formulated the idea in these words: “Das ästhetische Wertgefühl ist unmittelbares beglücktes Erleben meiner selbst in einem sinnlichen Gegenstand.”¹ Beaudelaire, after hearing Wagner’s music for the first time, referred to his experience as to one of the *grandes jouissances* of his life.

By that sensation shall ye know good music!

Going one step beyond the general axioms which we deducted from Pater’s doctrine, let us find a more specific test that might disclose the worth or defects of a musical composition, and thereby probe into the validity of Mr. Gilman’s claim. We shall be helped in our task by a sentence in one of Richard Middleton’s short stories, so remarkably fine that it would alone suffice to make his name live among men, after his premature and tragic death. He wrote of one performing the grateful labor of talking about himself: “My words were warmed into life by an eloquence that is not ordinarily mine, my adjectives were neither commonplace nor far-fetched, my adverbs fell into their sockets with a sob of joy.” What a *trouvaille*! I propose to paraphrase this sentence for our purpose in this way: “My melodies were warmed into life by a spontaneity that is not ordinarily mine, my harmonies were neither commonplace nor far-fetched, my modulations fell into their sockets with a sob of joy.” If you can say this much of your composition, and find others feeling likewise, methinks you have come very near writing a masterpiece. Inventive thought, governed by a critical ear, will work the wonder.

And thereby, also, shall ye know good music!

In art, not more than in soups, the question of taste, of personal preference, is bound up in that of idiosyncrasies and education. But we have agreed not to quarrel about the kind of soup we do or do not like. All we demand is that it really please someone, that “thote” and palate be jointly instrumental in its composition, that it should not be left too long upon the fire, and that it honestly represent whatever style of cooking it may pretend to be.

As far as music is concerned, that is the pith of Mr. O. G. Sonneck’s terse remark: “Let a quadruple fugue be a quadruple fugue; let program music be program music. But both must, above all else, be rich in musical invention!” They will be richest when the composer orders the weaving of his contrapuntal

¹The sense of aesthetic value is a direct, and pleasurable realization of the Ego, in a sensuous object.

web, the distribution of his chords, the combination of his tonal colors, and the pulsation of his rhythms, so that the total effect obtains the greatest possible amount of sensuous beauty. I, for one, have never been able to feel the slightest emotional enjoyment from listening to a fugue, as little as a conventionalized design or the busy convolutions on a wallpaper have ever thrilled me. I remember suffering under fugues, and having had to live with wallpapers, that were equally exasperating. Nor is there any difference between retracing, with our ear, the stenciled walks of *dux* and *comes*, and following, with hypnotized and helpless eye, the intertwining branches of an endless rose-chain on a stupid wall. As regards program music, there are also differences of opinion. Busoni, in speaking of the few and trivial effects of tone, that are unequivocally descriptive, says that we debase Tone to Noise when we begin to imitate sounds of nature—the rolling of thunder, the roar of forests, etc.—and that therein lies the complete stock in trade of program music. Goethe wrote in a letter to Zelter: “Töne durch Töne zu malen, zu donnern, zu schmettern, zu plätschern und zu patschen ist detestabel.”¹ We are significantly reminded of Pater’s “limitations.” The truth is that when we attempt to imitate the bleating of sheep with the aid of musical instruments, we may or may not succeed in pulling off a clever trick. But that is all. We certainly do not create sounds of sensuous beauty. With opera the state of affairs is no better. Wagner called the form of opera he found “ein unbeschreiblich konfuses Wechselbalg.” He thought his *Musik-drama* would remedy the trouble. Others, after him, have thought they could improve it. The fact remains that what are, musically speaking, the three most sensuously beautiful operas—Mozart’s “Zauberflöte,” Wagner’s “Tristan” and Debussy’s “Pelléas”—are probably the three worst “changelings” in the whole of operatic literature. And yet we shall go on enjoying them, for the sake of lovely and enthralling sounds, together with “The Barber of Seville,” “Carmen,” and “Boris Godounoff.” They live, and will live, by force of the exquisite taste that watched over their shaping, by the gift of subtle ears that overheard the secrets of the Gods.

Chopin’s piano music shows him to have possessed an “inner hearing” more delicate than that of Beethoven; Wagner developed a finer ear than Berlioz had; Scriabin had a more sensitive aural perception than was given to Max Reger. In other words, taste and technical proficiency are not inevitably linked together, nor

¹To paint tones with tones, to thunder, to bray, to splash and to dash is detestable.

need creative effort of great magnitude always exert the sensuous charm that a smaller talent may command. Some people find more pleasure in reading Albert Samain's poems than those of Victor Hugo. There are composers who possess an amazing inventiveness, supreme technical skill, composers who are not necessarily always dull, and yet they never succeed in freeing their work entirely from platitudes. Take Richard Strauss, for instance; he does not seem able to outgrow the sentimental "Liedertafel" themes in thirds and sixths. Look at the one in "Electra" which is supposed to characterize the House of the Atrides. Is it not more suggestive of a *Geheimer Oberrechnungsaußkalkulator's* family than of the royal blood of ancient Greece?

You may not be able to define "Taste" in the abstract, as Jean Marnold fears, but you certainly can tell where it acted as godfather to a child of human fancy. You can tell where an ear, more finely strung than another, attended the welding of lovely sounds into a work of art. You can certainly tell whether or not a piece of music lives up to the demands that Pater makes upon it. And most assuredly you can tell whether a musical composition has given you something like Beaudelaire's *grande jouissance*—that is, if you are fit to be heard in this matter.

Here it behooves us to delve into the question of "taste" in musical criticism. Mr. Gilman says: "I mean by taste instinctive perception of æsthetic excellence." Now, there is Henri Bergson, who writes: "Ce qu'il y a d'essentiel dans l'instinct ne saurait s'exprimer en termes intellectuels, ni par conséquent s'analyser."¹ Hence would we seem destined to be disappointed, should we try to define Mr. Gilman's "instinctive perception." Fortunately, and notwithstanding his scruples, the great French thinker himself ventures to give a definition, and boldly sets it down in four words: "*L'instinct est sympathie.*" Nothing could be shorter, more precise and, at the same time, more helpful in our investigation. According to Bergson's idea "instinctive perception" would require a certain "sympathy" with the object that is to be perceived. Instinctive perception of æsthetic excellence, then, would seem to require of the observer sympathy with the work of art under consideration. Sympathy with any given phase of art is largely a matter of temperament or native inclination. Its scope is widened by a broader vision of life itself. A moderate eclecticism may prove the wisest stand to take, "on this short day of frost and sun." The monomaniac, the man

¹The essential qualities of instinct can hardly be expressed in intelligent terms, nor consequently be subjected to analysis.

whose battle name is that of some composer with the syllable “-ite” affixed, is always with us. No matter how worthy the object of his “sympathy” itself, he is too apt to be a bore.

Now, the great confusion that confronts us in artistic evaluation, the contradictory judgments on a work of art,—which Mr. Gilman mistakes for proof conclusive, that there are no musical standards,—are due to the fact that “thote,” ear, and sympathy are seldom found all three in blissful union. Most people, making such criticism, are not possessed with the requisite attributes that make their perception both instinctive and authentic. Nevertheless, they think to have a right of expressing their opinion, which, to return to our mutton-broth, is not content to proclaim a soup too salty or ill-prepared, but which decrees that you should like heavy *potages*, in preference to clear *consommés*. And they demand considerate attention for their word as gospel truth, because they believe themselves endowed with “taste.” The *amateur* and would-be *connaissanceur* was never branded more stingingly than by that master musician of the brush, that marvellous etcher of the pen, James McNeill Whistler, when he wrote:

‘Taste’ has long been confounded with capacity, and accepted as sufficient qualification for the utterance of judgment in music, poetry and painting. Art is joyously received as a matter of opinion, and that it should be based upon laws as rigid and defined as those of the known sciences, is a supposition no longer to be tolerated by modern cultivation. For whereas no polished member of society is at all affected at admitting himself neither engineer, mathematician, nor astronomer, and therefore remains willingly discreet and taciturn upon these subjects, still would he be highly offended were he supposed to have no voice in what is clearly to him a matter of ‘taste’; and so he becomes of necessity the backer of the critic—the cause and result of his own ignorance and vanity!

If this applies to “patrons of the arts,” to “polished members of society,” it does, sadly enough, apply with equal force to many a so-called “professional critic.” The lot of the music-reviewer is a hard one. He has earned Heaven, when he dies, but should be allowed to dwell in that part of the celestial realm where golden harps and the angelic choir are out of earshot. He has to write, often hurriedly, a penetrating estimation of an uninspired work and soporific performance. Let us not be unkind to the poor sinner. *Absolvo te a peccatis tuis*. But this leniency is out of place with the prophets and high priests that offer sacrifice to their various little tin-gods-on-wheels, and are not always careful where they pick their sacrificial victim. Too many critics are bent on making literature. They excel in lengthy diatribes, fill

column after column with a sickening verbosity, without ever saying anything worth while or to the point. Their task is to impress the ignorant public. They accomplish it by being either frankly and frivolously entertaining, or sententiously obscure and impenetrable. The confusion that reigns in the minds of the uninitiated is rivaled by that displayed in the oracles of the wise ones. Nor is it to be wondered at. We need not be disturbed with Mr. Gilman, when he ponders over the wide difference of opinions on Wagner's "Parsifal" as expressed by Messrs. Runciman and Newman. The one sees in it nothing but "decrepit stuff," and the other calls it "wonderful and impressive." It all depends from what angle you look upon a thing. If you remember the music of "Die Meistersinger," "Siegfried," and "Tristan," while listening to "Parsifal," you may well be tempted to question whether the same vitality and exuberance of beauty that marks the first three, are as strongly potent in the last. If you are honest with yourself your answer can only be in the negative. Therefore, "decrepit stuff" may be a strong, but need not be a wrong qualification. On the other hand, if you are more easily impressed by the mystical, religious and metaphysical of the "Parsifal" poem and score, as such, and apart from what the same composer had previously produced, you may well, and justly, find it "wonderful and impressive." Take the two books of *Préludes* for the piano by Debussy; they contain things of a ravishingly sensuous charm—and, compared with these, there are others that are labored, dry, and on the verge of being classed among "decrepit stuff." Mrs. Malaprop was right: "Comparisons are odorous." Nor is it always the professional critic who finds the right scent. He is apt to be guided by textbook rules. Now, ugly consecutive fifths and octaves, in a four-part exercise of a pupil in harmony, are likely to sound badly to-day, and to continue doing so for all eternity. This does not prevent the *tasteful* use of such progressions, nor has it deterred Bach, Chopin, Grieg—not to speak of the younger schools—from using them with fine effect. But the conservative ear is blocked by prejudice. The opposite of the tardigrade, is the blindly progressive critic, who indiscriminately hails and praises everything new and revolutionary, for fear that it might ultimately prove a genuine advance in the art, and that his name should be missing in the roll-call of the vanguard. He aids and abets in making of the concert-hall a sideshow for freaks and mountebanks.

Philip Hale, that brilliant descendant of the great *chroniqueurs*, Sarcey, Scholl, and Clarétie, has a remarkable store of information

and often gleans interesting excerpts from all sorts of sources for the enlightenment and education of his readers. He culled from the London Times, not long ago, the following paragraph: "Taste may be bigoted, or indiscriminate, or catholic. Bigotry names the stage at which live ideas become dead labels. Music is full of such moments Lack of discrimination is a lack of humor True taste in music is neither parochial nor cosmopolitan, but catholic." And this catholicity will become a matter of course, a natural and comforting state of mind, if we let our taste in music be guided by "thote" and ear, both properly equipped and trained. Humbly and dispassionately, but always on our guard, we should cultivate sympathetic receptiveness, submitting our impressions to the test of Pater's "touchstones." The result may be that our temple will hold fewer idols, but those deities that remain enthroned will become holier to us, and more benign. Their message will mean more to us, and our faith in it will make us happier and better.

In short, there *are* touchstones by which to prove the carat-weight of music. To deny it is to fling open the portals to underbred composers and overbearing critics. They are in plenty, as it is, striving to enter by the half-open door.

J'ai soufflé—donc, Messieurs, c'est à vous de souffler.